



Defying the Sanctions: A flight to Iraq

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from the book

Project Censored 2001

by Peter Phillips and Project Censored

Seven Stories Press, 2001, paper



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Upon disembarking from the Olympic Airways plane that brings me to Iraq in November 2000, I can see some of the effects of the Western-imposed sanctions. What was once a busy international airport is now a desolate strip. Two lonely planes sit as if abandoned on the vast tarmac. There are no airport personnel to speak of, no baggage carts or utility vehicles, not even any visible security. On a wall inside the empty terminal is a handmade sign in Arabic and imperfect

English, it reads: "Down USA." A large portrait of Saddam Hussein gazes down upon us. His image can be found along the road to the city, in the hotel, and on various public buildings.

I am part of an international delegation of Greeks, Britons, Canadians, and Americans. Included are journalists, peace advocates, and members of the Greek parliament. Margarita Papandreou, former first lady of Greece and devoted political activist, leads the group. It is an especially moving moment for her. It has been her dream for ten years to

be able to fly directly to Baghdad. And ours is the first flight to Iraq by a state-owned commercial airline from the West in defiance of U.S./UN sanctions.

The Iraqi officials who greet us do not try to hide how pleased they are about our arrival. "Your presence is a statement against the inhuman means used against us. Iraq is a prosperous country capable of fulfilling the basic needs of the people but we are being prevented from doing so by the UN sanctions," one of them says. "Feel free to go anywhere and speak to anyone."

Iraq. Most Americans do not know that Saddam Hussein was put into power by a CIA-engineered coup to stop the Iraqi revolution-which he did by massacring the communists and the left wing of his own Baath party. But in time Saddam proved to be a disappointment to his mentors in Washington. Instead of becoming the comprador ruler who opened his country to free-market capital penetration on terms that were thoroughly favorable to Western investors, he devoted a substantial portion of Iraq's export earnings to human services and economic development. In 1972, Iraq nationalized its oil industry, and was immediately denounced by U.S. leaders as a "terrorist" nation.

Before the six weeks of air attacks known as the Gulf War (which ended in February 1991), Iraq's standard of living was the highest in the Middle East. Iraqis enjoyed free medical care and free education. Literacy had reached about 80 percent. Most Iraqi youth were educated up through secondary school. University students of both genders received scholarships to study at home and abroad. In the eyes of Western leaders, Saddam was that penultimate evil, an economic nationalist, little better than a communist. He would have to be taught a lesson. His country needed to be bombed back into the Third World from which it was emerging.

The high explosive tonnage delivered upon Iraq during the Gulf War was more than twice the combined Allied air offensive of World War II. Within the first few days of bombing, there was no running water in the country. More than 90 percent of Iraq's electrical capacity was destroyed. Its telecommunication systems, including television and radio stations, were demolished, as were its flood control, irrigation, sewage treatment, water purification, and hydroelectric systems. Farm herds and poultry farms suffered heavy losses. U.S. planes burned wheat and grain fields with

incendiary bombs and hit hundreds of schools, hospitals, rail stations, bus stations, air-raid shelters, mosques, and historic sites. Factories that produced textiles, cement, chlorine, petrochemicals, and phosphate were hit repeatedly. So were the refineries, pipelines, and storage tanks of Iraq's oil industry. Iraqi civilians and soldiers fleeing Kuwait were slaughtered by the thousands on what became known as the "Highway of Death." Also massacred were Iraqi soldiers who tried to surrender to U.S. forces on a number of occasions. In all, some 200,000 Iraqis were killed in those six weeks. Nearly all U.S. planes, Ramsey Clark notes, "employed laser-guided depleted-uranium missiles, leaving 900 tons of radioactive waste spread over much of Iraq with no concern for the consequences to future life."

Our delegation got a grim glimpse of the war's aftermath. We visited the Al Amerya bomb shelter where more than 400 civilians, mostly women and children, had been incinerated by two US missiles. Blackened ossified body parts, including a child's hand, can still be seen melded into the ceiling. Along one wall is the irradiated shadow of a woman holding

a baby in her arms, a ghoulish fresco created by the heat blast of the missiles. The shadow of another figure can be seen on the cement floor. The shelter has been made into a shrine, with candles, plastic flowers, and pictures of the victims. The guide notes that U.S. reconnaissance saw civilians using the shelter on a nightly basis during the early days of the bombing, yet it was still chosen as a target. In the ten years of "peace" since February 1991, an additional 400 tons of explosives have been dropped on Iraq, 300 people have been killed, and many hundreds wounded. The United States and United Kingdom, with the participation of France, imposed a no-fly zone over the northern region of the country, ostensibly to protect the Kurds. This newly found humanitarian concern did not extend to the Kurds residing on the Turkish side of the border. The next year, another no-fly zone was imposed in the south, reputedly to protect Shiite settlements, effectively dividing the country into three parts. By 1998, the French had withdrawn from both zones, but U.S. and British air attacks on military and civilian targets have continued almost on a daily basis, including strafing raids against Iraqi agricultural developments. Baghdad's repeated protests to the United Nations have gone unheeded. Since 1998, three members of the Security Council-Russia, China, and France-and various nonpermanent members have condemned the raids as illegal and unauthorized by the Security Council.

To drive the point home to us, on the second day of our visit, U.S. warplanes fired four missiles at the village of Hmaid in the southern province of Basra, one of which struck the Ali AlHayaini school, wounding four children and three teachers. Several homes were also hit.

Picking Up the Pieces. Despite the years of bombings and the even greater toll on human life taken by the sanctions, visitors to Baghdad do not see a city in ruins. Much of the wreckage has been cleared away, much has been repaired. In our hotel there is running water throughout the day, hot water in the morning. Various streets in Baghdad are lined with little stores, surprisingly well-stocked with household appliances, hardware goods, furniture, and clothes (much of which has a secondhand look).

We see no derelicts or homeless people on the streets of Baghdad, no prostitutes or ragged bands of abandoned children, though there are occasional youngsters eager to shine shoes or solicit spare change. But even they seem to be well-fed and decently clothed. Obviously, despite all the destruction wrought by the sanctions, Iraq still has not undergone sufficient free-market "structural adjustment."

A British member of our delegation who has made more than a dozen trips to Iraq over the past decade sees some changes for the better. A few years ago, the cars all looked like "death traps"; tires were patched beyond recognition, windows were cracked, and doors were falling off the hinges, she tells me. Now the Iraqis seem to have procured vehicles that are in better repair. In addition, large swaths of the city used to be shrouded in complete darkness; now there are lights just about everywhere, though mostly on the dim side. There are more shops with more goods, "although 70 percent of the people can't buy anything." Still, "people used to feel hopelessly isolated and now there seems to be more hope and better morale," she concludes.

The Silent Cries of Children. Not everyone shows better morale. It is said that the most depressed officials in Iraq can be found in the Ministry of Health-not surprisingly, given the tragedies they confront. Aside from the 200,000 Iraqis slaughtered during the Gulf War, an additional 1.5 million civilians have died since 1991 as a result of the sanctions,

according to UNICEF reports and the Red Cross, many from what normally would be treatable and curable illnesses. Of these victims, 600,000 are children under five years of age. Maternal mortality rates have more than doubled, and 70 percent of Iraqi women suffer from anemia. Given the tons of depleted uranium used during the Allied attacks, cancer rates have skyrocketed: the childhood leukemia rate is now the highest in the world. Most of the leukemia increase is in southern Iraq where the bombing was heaviest.

We visit a children's hospital in Baghdad. The familiar sight of skeletal-looking infants, racked with diseases that make it impossible for them to retain or digest nutrients, are no longer evident. Such dying children still can be found in parts of Iraq but not at this hospital. Instead we encounter something equally ominous: children suffering from acute forms of multiple malignancies. Shrouded mothers stand by the beds like mournful sentinels, their eyes filled with unspoken grief. The journalists, photographers, and TV crews in our delegation descend upon these sad people, clicking and flashing away with that intrusive irreverence that is the press's modus operandi. A mother weeps quietly against the wall. One of the doomed children smiles up at us, which almost causes me to start weeping.

Things are getting worse, a doctor tells us; more and more children are turning up with leukemia. The medical staff is overwhelmed. One doctor says he sees 300 patients in three hours: "We cannot treat them properly." Some of the hospital rooms are lined with incubators that contain what look like premature births. These turn out to be infants who are the products of depleted uranium, born with serious deformities and malfunctions, urgently in need of surgical intervention. The hospital lacks the special instruments needed to operate on infants, not to mention ordinary medications, anesthetics, antibiotics, bandages, intravenous sets, and diagnostic equipment. Iraq's excellent national health care system, with its universal coverage, is now in shambles because of the embargo.

Things were supposed to get better when the sanctions were eased in 1996, allowing Iraq to make "oil for food" sales. Since then, \$32 billion in oil was sold abroad but only \$8 billion worth of materials has reached Iraq, less than \$5 or \$6 a month per person. Another \$10 billion has been allocated for "war compensation," in effect forcing the Iraqis to pay the costs incurred by the U.N. aggressors when destroying Iraq.

Another \$11 billion in cash sits in Western banks. Worse still, many essential things needed to rebuild the infrastructure-including the technological, medical, educational, communicational, and industrial systems of the nation- are still not available. Under the deleterious "dual use" doctrine, many vital commodities and materials needed for humanitarian and civilian purposes are banned because they conceivably could also be used by the military: computers, components for electrical transmitters and water pumps, even glycerin tablets needed for heart ailments. (It would take millions of glycerin tablets mixed with nitrogen to make one small explosive.)

The Foreign Minister Speaks. Iraq's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Tariq Aziz, a calm congenial man, meets with our delegation. In clear and precise English, he makes the following points: Before 1990, the United Nations had placed sanctions upon only a few nations, such as Rhodesia and South Africa, on a voluntary basis. "It was left to the countries themselves and the world to implement those sanctions or not implement them." Hence the effects were mild. But since 1990, U.S. leaders with their so-called New

World Order have imposed the severest embargo, "encircling Iraq with warships and airplanes that prevent even ordinary trips and ordinary cargoes." As with the sanctions against Yugoslavia, the minister notes, this policy has created a lot of suffering. "Therefore, when we say that this embargo is an international issue, it's not just anti-American propaganda. It's the truth. And it is quite horrid." The collapse of the Soviet Union has created a different international scene, he adds. With the end of the Cold War, "a new hot war and warm war" has been imposed on many nations, with Iraq as a prime target.

In spite of all the reports made by U.N. agencies themselves "informing the Security Council about the sufferings of the Iraqi people, and the deaths of so many children, and the deterioration of the Iraqi economy," Aziz reminds us, there is no likelihood of any change in U.N. policy on sanctions because of the Security Council veto wielded by the United States and Britain. Still the people of Iraq have not been merely passive victims. They have "refused to yield to American pressure and American blackmail." In addition, there is "the will of other peoples, the free women and men in this world" who refuse to support injustice and imperialism. After ten years, U.S. propaganda "is wearing thin," and "a lot of facts have become known to the peoples of the world" bringing a dramatic increase in support for Iraq-as measured by the growing number of air flights from various nations in defiance of the sanctions. Not only Iraq but its trading partners have sustained substantial commercial losses because of the ten-year embargo. In 2000, more than 1,500 international companies from 45 countries participated in the Iraqi trade fair. So, for both moral and legitimate commercial reasons, "the embargo is beginning to crack."

"Ten years ago," concludes Aziz, "we were told: history is over; from now on we will live according to the diktat of U.S. leaders in a Pax Americana. And those who do not accept this are 'rogue nations.'" But U.S. leaders are beginning to realize "that this new imperialism is not working.... Despite all its power, the United States is not God. It's not the Almighty. It's an imperialist force.... When a nation succeeds in refusing the dictate of imperialists," Aziz said, [and] succeeds in preserving its sovereignty, and its independence and dignity, that is an achievement." Aziz's closing plea was that we not rely on "the manipulated media" of the United States, Britain and Canada. "One of the basic human rights is that you have the right to make your own judgment, not to buy judgments made by others that might not be honest and true. So I hope that you will use this short visit to know what is going on in this country and what the realities are."

The "Realities." On the closing day of our trip, members of our delegation lay plans to carry on the battle against sanctions. These include: lobbying the U.N. Compensation Committee, which refuses to release the \$11 billion in Iraqi "oil-for-food" earnings; joining with Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and other NGOs to lobby the U.N. Security Council; lobbying the U.N. Human Rights Commission in Geneva and the parliament of the European Union; lobbying elected representatives and religious leaders in various countries; and sending messages through the Internet.

The sanctions wall is not about to crumble, but it is showing cracks. In 1998 Scott Ritter, chief U.N. weapons inspector in Iraq since 1991, resigned and accused the U.S. government of undercutting U.N. weapons inspectors. Meanwhile U.S. leaders and the press continued to portray Iraq as bent on nuclear aggression, despite the fact that Baghdad cooperated fully with U.N. inspectors who scoured the country in a vain search for weapons of mass destruction or the capacity to build them.

Also in 1998, Denis Halliday, U.N. Assistant Secretary General and Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq, resigned in protest of what the sanctions were doing to that country. In early 2000, Hans von Sponeck, U.N. Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq and Jutta Burghart, head of U.N. World Food Program in Baghdad, resigned in protest of the sanctions.

Still, the State Department and the U.S. media continue to blame Saddam, not the sanctions, for the misery endured by the Iraqi people. The claim that sanctions hurt ordinary Iraqis "is outweighed by the sad truth that Saddam Hussein is determined to keep portions of his population in poverty," intones a Washington Post editorial reprinted in the International Herald Tribune (November 14, 2000). The Iraqi leader, the Post assures us, is a "warmongering dictator" who needs to be contained by a still more severe application of sanctions. Upon being selected as the new U.S. Secretary of State in December 2000, General Colin Powell echoed this position, announcing that he would strive to "reenergize" the sanctions against Iraq. The Iraqi leadership could turn U.S. policy completely around by uttering just two magic words: "free market." All they would have to do is invite the IMF and World Bank into Iraq, eliminate free education and free medical care, abolish the minimal food ration that goes to every Iraqi, abolish the housing subsidies and transportation subsidies, and hand over the country's oil industry to the corporate cartels. To lift the sanctions, Iraq must surrender to the tender mercies of the free-market paradise as Yugoslavia has recently done under the newly minted, Western-sponsored president, Kostunica, and as so many other nations have done. Until then, Iraq will continue to be designated a "rogue nation" by those policymakers in Washington who themselves are the meanest profit-driven, power-mongering rogues on earth

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